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Parody Playbills: The Politics of the Playbill in Britain in the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries

James Gregory

... the crudest play-bills, the mere flotsam and jetsam of their own day, have now an appreciable value; and the mushroom literature of a modern election, no matter how poor it may have appeared in contemporary eyes, will certainly not be lacking in interest to the historian or the antiquarian of another day.¹

Edward Maund Thompson, the principal librarian of the British Museum, concerned in July 1895 to create an archive from the political ephemera of the day, called for electioneering addresses and literature to be sent to the Museum, a fact that led to the editorial comment in the *Western Daily Press* which prefaces this article.² The Bristol newspaper's judgment on Thompson's effort suggested in passing that the ephemeral playbill for advertising entertainment was similar to the propagandist literature of electoral politics in historical interest. Stimulated by the British Library's new crowdsourcing project *In the Spotlight*, studying the vast number of surviving eighteenth and nineteenth century theatre playbills, this article looks at the tradition of the parody or mock playbill in this period. It was a well-known genre for lampooning current political events and personalities, especially at times of parliamentary and other elections, or for promoting a reform cause (such as capital punishment abolition and temperance in the Victorian era).

Playbills were single-sheet advertisements printed on flimsy, narrow, plain or coloured paper, and placed in shop windows, pasted to walls, distributed in the streets, printed in the newspapers and read out to the public to promote the play, show or exhibition (see fig. 1).³ Theatre aficionados and antiquarians became fascinated with old playbills in the nineteenth century (the theatre historian Jacky Bratton calls playbills the 'essence of theatrical antiquarianism'), reprinting them in newspapers, and recounting their history (see for instance Percy Fitzgerald's essay, in the *Gentleman's Magazine* in June 1900 which, ironically, bewailed that 'The British Museum is sadly if not wholly deficient' in collecting the old playbills 'and seems, moreover, to be quite uncurious in the matter').⁴ As the British Library's *In the Spotlight* publicity material indicates, these sheets offer a rich source of material on entertainment and print culture: from scenery

I would like to thank Christian Algar for stimulating this research by showcasing the British Library's crowd sourcing project *In the Spotlight* at the University of Plymouth in November 2017; and to Barry Taylor.

¹ *Western Daily Press* (13 July 1895), p. 5.

² On ephemera, see Ann-Marie Foster, "'I am sending herewith' – First World War Ephemera at the British Library", *eBLJ* (2017), art.3, pp.1-12. <http://www.bl.uk/eblj/2017/articles/article3.html>.

³ On the prehistory of the playbill, the earliest surviving in Britain being from 1687, see Tiffany Stern, "'On each Wall and Corner Poast": Playbills, Title-pages, and Advertising in Early Modern London', *English Literary Renaissance*, xxxvi (2006), pp. 57-89. For a recent survey of eighteenth-century playbills from the perspective of digital humanities, and as a means to study genre and author, see Mark Vareschi and Mattie Burkert, 'Archives, Numbers, Meaning: The Eighteenth-Century Playbill at Scale', *Theatre Journal*, lxxviii (2016), pp. 597-613.

⁴ Percy Fitzgerald, 'The Play-Bill: Its Growth and Evolution', *Gentleman's Magazine*, 288: 2034 (June 1900), pp. 529-50; 'Theatre in London in 1832: a new overview' in Jacqueline S. Bratton, *New Readings in Theatre History* (Cambridge, 2003), p. 39. For antiquarianism linked to playbills in a non-western culture, see Jonathan Zwicker, 'Playbills, Ephemera, and the Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Japan', *Journal of Japanese Studies*, xxxv:1 (Winter 2009), pp. 37-59.

and set piece descriptions, to colourful graphic designs and typefaces during the nineteenth century. Their common features (as identified recently by Mark Vareschi and Mattie Burkert): information on the venue, main-piece title and genre, main-piece cast list; dancing or other entertainments and after-piece, details of tickets, whether the performance was revived, new or for the ‘benefit’ of an actor, provided elements to be parodied.



BL, Playbills 263. A ‘genuine’ theatrical playbill as displayed in digital facsimile on the British Library’s crowdsourcing platform *In the Spotlight* <https://www.libcrowds.com/collection/playbills>. Key details of theatrical performances can be identified and transcribed by volunteers. The data is being made available for research and for enhancing catalogue descriptions on British Library discovery systems.

The principal primary sources for playbill parodies are the contemporary histories of electoral contests, periodicals, and newspapers of the period that presented, reproduced and circulated them in metropolitan and provincial society, and which have been studied here through digitized collections such as the British Newspaper Archive and Google books. Local record offices, and collections of broadsides, squibs and notices from elections in the British Library, may also include examples of the mock playbill (some of the local archives are listed in n. 60 below). The mock theatre playbill was just one among a rich array of parodic and satirical literary forms that had a significant part to play in electioneering. These included playbills for non-theatrical entertainments (see fig. 2 for an example from Yarmouth in 1835), facetious correspondence, mock advertisements for lost and found items, lampooning book sales (which permitted a similar ironic use of literary titles), accounts of the arrival of strange animals, and the locally allusive verse or song. The political historian James Vernon has argued that these made politics ‘accessible, concrete and familiar’ and that the ‘visual appearance of these genres sought out an audience by promising to fulfil the expectations associated with the genre.’⁵

A rare comment on the playbill parody process, albeit itself in a collection of political squibs, appears in 1824:

I’ll set some of my seven-and-sixpence-a-day *Gentlemen* (knaves, fiddlers, and vagabonds!) to copy the fiftieth edition of an electioneering Play-bill, substituting the names of some of the “ruffians and assassins” who are most active against me.

This is an old fusty, hackney’d measure, but no matter, we must attempt something, and being destitute of talent and originality, we must even put up with sheer old-fashioned personality.⁶

⁵ See James Vernon, *Politics and the People: A Study in English Political Culture, 1815–1867* (Cambridge, 1993), p. 136.

⁶ From the squib, ‘Pocket-Book Found’, in *Squibs and Handbills relating to a Mayor-Choosing at Beverley, Now first Collected and Reprinted as they were original published* (Beverley?, 1824), p. 28.

Printed locally, sometimes with the price and – as later required by law – the name of the printer, the election playbill squib must have been quite familiar. In London, examples commenting on current politics and scandals might emanate from publishers' addresses in the notorious Holywell Street (as in the playbills reproduced as figs 4 and 5)⁷. Often a witty parody of the playbill form, the mock playbill used the language of theatre and its all-too-translatable figures of buffoons, farcical behaviour and 'limited performances'. Play titles, character names, and theatre roles allowed subtle (and less subtle) jokes to be made at the expense of public figures. Often the implication was that the stuff of politics was insubstantial or sham; and the politician himself (and they were, of course, all male, given that nineteenth-century parliamentary and, until the late nineteenth century, municipal elections, involved men only as voters, candidates, and elected representatives) was little better than a ham actor or some other lowly entertainer.

The scholarship on the relationship between politics and the theatre in this period is rich and vigorous: with work on radical politics and the use of theatre in the age of the French Revolution; and in nineteenth-century movements such as Chartism; the 'theatrics' (i.e., performativity) or attitudes towards the theatre by leading political figures such as the playwright-politician Richard Brinsley Sheridan, Sir Robert Peel and William Gladstone; the political purposes or messages in plays by leading playwright such as Elizabeth Inchbald; or in the harlequinade or pantomime; and the culture of theatricality which more widely rendered the playbill format familiar to its readers.⁸ As I discuss in the next section, visual and literary satire also brought related treatment of politicians: depicted as performers or actors in the scripts of parodic plays, and represented in these roles by cartoonists'.⁹



By His Majesty's command! Just arrived Praed & Baring respectfully acquaint the public, that they will have the honour of presenting a variety of grand amusements, on Tuesday and Wednesday January 6 & 7, 1835, in the Market-Place, where they have erected a commodious booth, replete with every accommodation. (Yarmouth: Crisp, 1835). BL, N.Tab.2012/6(1ii) © British Library.

⁷ The other address given was '282, Strand' the address of the wholesale bookseller and publisher J. A. Brook and Co., in the 1870s.

⁸ See, on Sheridan, Robert W. Jones, 'Sheridan and the Theatre of Patriotism: Staging Dissent during the War for America', *Eighteenth-century Life*, xxvi:1 (Winter 2002), pp. 24-5. For the nineteenth century, see essays in Peter Yeandle, Katherine Newey and Jeffrey Richards (eds.), *Politics, Performance and Popular Culture: Theatre and Society in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (Manchester, 2016); and (for the Chartist era) M. Brodie, 'Free Trade and Cheap Theatre: Sources of Politics for the Nineteenth-Century London Poor', *Social History*, xxviii:3 (October 2003), pp. 346-60.

⁹ See Henry Miller, *Politics Personified: Portraiture, Caricature and Visual Culture in Britain, c.1830-80* (Oxford, 2016), pp. 207-18.

The theatre of politics

The context for the parodic political playbill needs to be outlined. One is the view that politics is like theatre – all about performance – and like a play for a paying public, for commercial motives.¹⁰ The view of human life generally as a theatre is not new. In the nineteenth century one American writer, John Foster, imagined in a pessimistic or puritanical vein the world as ‘the devil’s play-bill ... in which Satan conducts the endless, horrible drama of laughing and suffering’.¹¹ Another context, not examined here in this article, is the politics that appeared on the theatrical stage, whether in pantomime or other theatrical forms, despite the censorship which operated in Britain.¹²

What would be more natural, for political satirists and political opponents, than to belittle and deflate the activities of statesmen and aspiring parliamentary representatives through the mock playbill? In fact there was a continuing tradition of treating parliament as a grand (or dull) spectacle or theatre – with MPs and political leaders as actors, performing for a season and then shutting down, with their party leaders likened to theatrical managers, and their key personalities as celebrities of the stage. In the eighteenth century the newspapers were already referring to ‘St Stephen’s Theatre’ when they criticized government and individual MPs, equating their performance with puppet shows and publishing satirical lists of ‘new publications’ that included plays.¹³ For John Barrell, the identification of political activity with mere spectacle was a strategy to remove the power to awe the spectator, making it ‘just another show, and not a very good one either; one that is fake, tawdry, and ridiculous’.¹⁴

The mock playbill has a long history. We can find traces of parodic playbills in the Stuart era.¹⁵ Richard Steele in *The Tatler* in April 1710 presented politics through the medium of a stage prompter (the Duke of Leeds) with the stage matters discussed actually being political affairs: ‘I have known men, within my remembrance arrive to the highest dignities of the theatre, who made their entrance in the quality of mutes, jointstools, flower-pots, and tapestry hangings’.¹⁶ Scholars such as Thomas McGeary, Gillian Russell and Barrell have studied the satirical genre of the parody or mock playbill through the eighteenth century, from the age of Sir Robert Walpole in the 1730s with the parliamentary session presented as a play at Robin’s

¹⁰ Chris Kyle, *Theater of State: Parliament and Political Culture in Early Stuart England* (Stanford, CA, 2012), pp.1-2.

¹¹ ‘Retrospect of the Heathen World’, cited in Luther Townsend, *Lost Forever* (Boston, 1875), p.155. See, more generally, Jeffery Richards, *Theater Enough: American Culture and the Metaphor of the World Stage, 1607-1789* (London, 1991).

¹² See ‘Politics in Plays’, *The Era* (24 April 1886), p.15, for a late Victorian commentary on this. See Katherine Newey, ‘Bubbles of the Day: the Melodramatic and the Pantomimic’ in Yeandle, Newey and Richards, *Politics, Performance and Popular Culture*, ch. 3, (p. 67 notes a parody pantomime playbill from *The Satirist* in 1840).

¹³ See for instance, on political farce at St Stephen’s theatre, relating to the borough of Hindon, *Morning Post and Daily Advertiser* (22 May 1776); ‘performers of Stephen’s theatre’ and Carnevalle’s *Fantoccini*, *Morning Post* (10 January 1791), repeating a comic line, about the old Comedy of *Lawyers Outwitted*, in *Morning Post* (8 January 1791), and Miles Peter Andrews MP making his debut at St Stephen’s Theatre, *London Packet* (2 November 1796). On the image of the puppet show, see ‘On Puppet-Shews, Dramatical and Political’, *Whitehall Evening Post* (13-15 August 1782). See, for satirical lists of new publications, *Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser* (1 August 1783) and *Morning Herald* (2 August 1783), e.g., ‘SENATORIAL Honor; a Farce; by the Coalition.’

¹⁴ John Barrell, ‘Radicalism, Visual Culture, and Spectacle in the 1790s’, *Field Day Review*, iv (2008), pp. 40-61 (p. 51).

¹⁵ Tiffany Stern, *Documents of Performance in Early Modern England* (Cambridge, 2009), p. 57, for a playbill on Charles I. Chapter 2 of Stern’s study is concerned with playbills, and title pages.

¹⁶ *The Tatler*, iv:193 (1 July 1710). The passage is quoted by the actor-manager and playwright Colley Cibber, *An Apology for the Life of Mr. Colley Cibber, written by himself*, new edn (London, 1822), p. 361.

‘great Theatrical Booth’.¹⁷ It was, as Russell notes elsewhere, a ‘highly conventionalised genre of reporting’.¹⁸

In 1784 the opposition of Charles James Fox and others to William Pitt the Younger’s administration brought forth a parody playbill in *St James’s Chronicle*: ‘A new *Comedy*, called THE EVIL SPIRIT of the COALITION; or, *An Attempt to overthrow the present virtuous Administration*,’ listing the principal characters (the ‘real men of the People’ being Pitt’s administration). And informing readers that ‘Every Thing will be conducted with the Regularity and Decorum for which St Stephen’s Theatre is remarkable’.¹⁹ There is a playbill republished in 1786 from the *Public Advertiser* (which reported theatrical and operatic entertainments in the capital) in *The new Foundling hospital for wit*, in which the ‘singers, dancers, and instrumental performers, for the ensuing season’ in the genres of ‘serious opera’ and ‘comic opera’, are listed.²⁰ The originals of the Italian figures of Sig. Frederico Norti (‘1st Buffo’) and 1st serious Man ‘Sig. Georgio Germeno’; ‘2d Serious Men ‘Sir Carlo Jenkinsoni’ are easy to discern: Lord North, Lord George Germain, Sir Charles Jenkinson, and other peers and MPs appear as if listed in a London playbill. For those *au fait* with political personalities (the theatre-going political elite), digs at figures such as Gerald Hamilton (known as ‘Single Speech’ Hamilton from his ‘solitary display of eloquence’ in parliament), George Selvin (George Selwyn?), as ‘attendant mutes’ or Jemima Luttrell (James Luttrell, MP for Stockbridge?) as ‘Serious Woman’ would have raised a laugh:

The managers hope for the encouragement of the public, as they have engaged most of the above mentioned performers at very high salaries, except those marked thus*, who belong to various country-companies, and perform for their own amusement.

Reproduced in several contemporary histories of the Westminster election of May 1784 including an early example of that genre of pollbook and election squib collections (sold for two shillings and sixpence), *The Wit of the Day, Or the Humours of Westminster: Being a Complete Collection of the Advertisements, Hand-bills, Puffs, Paragraphs, Squibs, Songs, Ballads, &c. which Have Been Written and Circulated During the Late Remarkable Contest for that City. Faithfully Compiled by a Clerk to a Committee in 1784*, is a playbill, from which I quote the opening section:

¹⁷ The hand-drawn mock playbill is in the British Museum http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx?searchText=1868.0808.3576 advertising Punch at the ‘Opera House in the Haymarket’ on ‘This present evening’ (the date is given ‘Jan: 18: 1734’). ‘The Norfolk Company of artificall Comedians at Robins great Theatrical Booth Palace Yard’ (see Thomas McGeary, *The Politics of Opera in Handel’s Britain* (Cambridge, 2013), pp.101-2. On the political playbill in the eighteenth century see Gillian Russell, ‘Theatrical Culture’, ch. 6 in Thomas Keymer and Jon Mee (eds.) *Cambridge Companion to English Literature, 1740-1830* (Cambridge, 2004), pp. 103-6; Gillian Russell, “‘Announcing Each Day the Performances’: Playbills, Ephemerality, and Romantic Period Media / Theater History”, *Studies in Romanticism*, liv: 2 (Summer 2015), pp. 241-68; John Barrell, *‘Exhibition Extraordinary!!’: Radical Broadsides of the Mid 1790s* (Nottingham, 2000).

¹⁸ Gillian Russell, *Women, Sociability and Theatre in Georgian London* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 44.

¹⁹ *St. James’s Chronicle or the British Evening Post* (8-10 January 1784).

²⁰ *The new Foundling hospital for wit; a collection of fugitive pieces in prose and verse*, 6 vols (London, 1784), vol. ii, pp. 266-8.

COVENT-GARDEN
By Command of their Majesties
This Day will be presented
(Not acted these Three years)
FREE ELECTION, A Farce
Old Obstinate, by Mr King,
Admiral Broadside (first court candidate) Lord Hood.
Judas, (second court candidate) Sir Cecil Wray.
Champion of Liberty, Mr. Fox.
Champion of Prerogative, Mr Wilkes.
The parts of Voters for the first candidate will be performed by a select Company of Land and Sea Forces.
Voters for the second Court Candidate, by the
Tallow-chandlers, Bug-destroyers, Messengers, Scullions, and other respectable Officers of his Majesty's Household, being their first appearance in these characters.
Genius of Beauty, Duchess of Devonshire.
Female Patriots, Duchess of Portland, Lady Dun-Cannon, Hon. Mrs. Bouverie, and others.²¹

This was the election in which, scandalously, as the squib alludes to, the Duchess of Devonshire canvassed the plebeian voter in support of the Whig candidate Charles James Fox.

Barrell notes that the parliamentary 'Committee of Secrecy' established to respond to the threat of the French Revolutionary-era sedition, saw the mock playbill as 'among the most apparently trivial but in fact dangerously resourceful examples of the reform societies' attempts to corrupt the uncommitted and ignorant': with playbills briefly created in 1794–1795 depicting parliamentary doings under William Pitt's aegis as the equivalent of the conjuror's show or play, and circulating such horrors as 'La Guillotine, or George's head in the basket'.²² Printers took the satires that appeared in the newspapers and created facsimiles of genuine playbills. Several of these, by the printer Richard Lee, and in the British Library collections, are reproduced in Barrell's essay 'Radicalism, Visual Culture, and Spectacle in the 1790s'. Barrell argues that the familiarity with authentic playbill and theatre advertisement copy meant that the satires could effectively address both the polite (readers of parliamentary news and debate) and the vulgar. In response the publisher James Asperne produced, among other counter-revolutionary material, his own 'ironical play-bills,' for the 'lower classes of the people'.²³

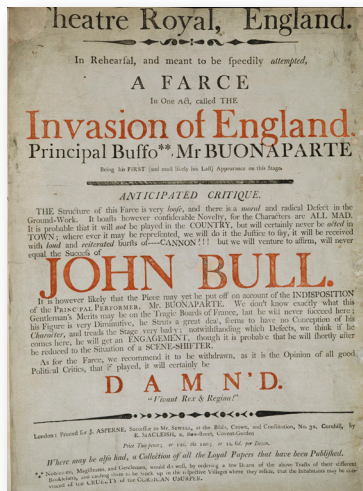
Engraved playbills satirized current world affairs during the Napoleonic Wars, such as the threatened invasion of 1803, thus, published by Asperne in black and red type, 'In Rehearsal, and meant to be speedily attempted, A FARCE In One Act called THE Invasion of England. Principal Buffo, Mr. BUONAPARTE Being his FIRST (and most likely his LAST) Appearance

²¹ *History of the Westminster election, containing every material occurrence, from its commencement on the 1st of April, to the final close of the poll, on the 17th of May, to which is prefixed a summary account of the proceedings of the late Parliament, so far as they appear connected with the East India business, and the dismissal of the Portland administration, with other select and interesting occurrences at the Westminster meetings previous to its dissolution on the 25th day of March, 1784: To which is now added a complete history of the scrutiny, and the proceedings of the House of Commons thereon* (London, 1785), p. 138; *The Wit of the Day, Or the Humours of Westminster: Being a Complete Collection of the Advertisements, Handbills, Puffs, Paragraphs, Squibs, Songs, Ballads, &c. which Have Been Written and Circulated During the Late Remarkable Contest for that City. Faithfully Compiled by a Clerk to a Committee* (London, 1784), pp. 9–11 (p. 9).

²² Barrell, 'Radicalism, Visual Culture, and Spectacle in the 1790s', p. 51.

²³ Barrell, 'Radicalism, Visual Culture, and Spectacle in the 1790s', p. 55; on Asperne, *London Review and Literary Journal* (December 1803), p. 455.

on this Stage.’ (fig. 3).²⁴ This would be reproduced in *We Laughed at Boney (or, We’ve Been Through it All Before)* in 1943.²⁵



Theatre Royal England. In rehearsal, and meant to be speedily attempted a farce in one act, called The Invasion of England. Principal Buffo**, Mr. Buonaparte, etc. England. London : J. Asperne, [1803?] General Reference Collection 1851.c.3.(77.) © British Library.

The Royal Standard, and loyal political register of 7 April 1804 published the following, shortly after William Pitt’s return to power:

**POLITICAL THEATRICALS
AT THE
OLD THEATRE ST STEPHEN’S**

Immediately after the Easter Holidays will be brought forward having been some
Time in Rehearsal a Tragico Farcico Comedy called

THE GRAND JUNCTION.

PRINCIPAL CHARACTERS.

Janus, Mr F–X. Don Quixotte, Mr. W– DH– M. Snake, Mr C –N– G.
Prince Prettyman, Mr K– NN –D. Sancho, Lord F– LKST– NE.
Sir Francis Wronghead, Mr B –NKS. Hawthorn, Lord G–L–V–S–N.
Busy Body, Sir H. M– LDM– Y. Sylvester Daggerwood, Col. H– TCH– NSON.
Carlo, Mr D– NT. Thunder, Dr. L– WR– CE.
Lightning, Lord T– MPLE Angel, Mr R– SE Scribe, Mr C. L –NG.
Paddy, Lord De BL –QU– RE. Cockpit, Admiral B– KL– Y.
Ghost, Mr E– LL– T. Tom Thumb, Col CR– F– D.
Manager, Mr T G –V –LLE. And Riddle, Mr P– TT.
Servants to Snake, Sir J W– TT– SLEY, Mr C– RTW –GHT, Mr ST– RGES.
Scene Shifter, Mr R. W –D.
First Trumpet and Prompter Mr W COBBETT.

The Prologue to be spoken by Mr C– NN– G.
The Epilogue by Col H –N.
Vivant REX et REGINA !!!²⁶

²⁴ Jack Werner, *We Laughed at Boney (or, We’ve Been Through it All Before)* (London, 1943), p. 10.

²⁵ James Davey and Richard Johns, *Broadsides: Caricatures and the Navy 1756-1815* (Barnsley, 2012), pp. 52-3.

²⁶ *The Royal Standard, and loyal political register* (7 April 1804), p. 219.

The characters listed in this playbill derive from a mixture of plays, Sir John Vanbrugh and Colley Cibber's *The Provok'd Husband* (Francis Wronghead), George Colman's *Sylvester Daggerwood*, George Villiers's *The Rehearsal* for Prince Prettyman, possibly the comedy *The Busy Body* by Susannah Centlivre, as well as *Don Quixote*. The readership would have required a good knowledge of eighteenth-century theatre to understand these allusions, although clearly referring to Charles James Fox as Janus and George Canning as a snake were obvious suggestions about these politicians' integrity or character.

In a related satirical practice, newspapers and periodicals, such as the *Morning Chronicle* in 1805, published reviews of parliament as if the 'imperial senate' were merely a 'Theatre Royal, St Stephen's', where the manager, moreover, was concerned with personal profit:

THIS theatre closed for the season yesterday se'nnight. Its success has been very various. The Manager, we believe, may have got as much money as in any former season, but has certainly made no very important additions to the *fame* of his theatre. To do him justice, however, he has been sadly perplexed by disputes among the performers, who, although of a very indifferent description, give themselves all the airs of first-rate actors; and, although he has repeatedly gratified some of them, by bringing them forward in characters for which they were totally unfit, and has advanced the salaries of others, yet he was not able, almost in the whole course of the season, to produce any new piece that gave satisfaction to the town. Towards the close of the season he had the additional mortification of losing some of his company, particularly Mr. Sidmouth, who threw up his part, without any regular notice, one morning as he was coming from a private rehearsal.²⁷

Here, the interpretation of politics is clear: the value of what was done in Westminster was variable, the politicians were temperamental and difficult for the prime minister to control, they often lacked talent despite the expense involved, did very little, or acted like prima donnas. From imagining the parliamentary world as one in which farce rather than seriousness predominated, it was a short step to satirizing parliamentary life as a piece of theatre for which description of cast, scenery, and dialogue could be produced as if for a printed play. There are early nineteenth-century examples but possibly this genre can be found throughout the nineteenth century.²⁸ The *Brighton Guardian* published a verse prologue 'for the forthcoming comedy of reform, to be performed at St Stephen's Theatre', 25 January 1832; and an early Victorian example appears in *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine*, 'No House. As Performed at the Theatre Royal, St Stephen's, on Tuesday, the ... of ... , 1840', which sought to amuse readers about the lack of interest south of the border in the crisis of the established Church in Scotland.²⁹

There are several instances where the metaphor or simile of theatre playbill was uttered in Parliament itself rather than made the mechanism for satire in newspapers or magazines. Debates on the bill which suspended Habeas Corpus in 1801, included the radical Sir Francis Burdett observing, on 14 April, 'He was at a loss to give a name to the play to be performed this evening in St. Stephen's theatre. He knew not what to make of a drama which opened with a farce and ended with a tragedy.'³⁰ Theatrical libel and playbill libels against William IV and Queen Adelaide during the parliamentary reform crisis were debated in the Commons, and several years later the Whig MP and novelist Edward Bulwer Lytton would refer in a pamphlet to a farce of anti-reform and note that 'even in farces, the loyalty of the play bill does not suffice

²⁷ *Morning Chronicle* (20 July 1805); reprinted in *The Spirit of the Public Journals for 1805* (London, 1806), vol. ix, pp. 178-9.

²⁸ See 'PUBLIC THEATRICALS. [From the British press.] National Theatre', on 'a new piece, entitled The Tenth Report' in *Spirit of the Public Journals* (London, 1806), vol. ix, pp. 88-9, on Lord Melville and Alexander Trotter; 'Theatre Royal, St Stephen's', *Morning Chronicle* (20 July 1805), p. [3].

²⁹ *Brighton Guardian* (25 January 1832), p. [4]; 'No House. As Performed at the Theatre Royal, St Stephen's, on Tuesday, the ... of ... , 1840', *Tait's Edinburgh Magazine* (December 1840), pp.787-93.

³⁰ *Cobbett's Parliamentary History of England*, vol. xxxv (London, 1819), col.1282.

to carry the public'.³¹ We find reported in the *Mirror of Parliament* and reprinted as a pamphlet, the speech made by the evangelical Sir George Sinclair Bt, in the House of Commons on 19 April 1839, on Lord John Russell's motion on Ireland (that the government of Ireland deserved the support of the Commons), containing the following allusion:

If the proceedings of this House had been announced to the public in the same form as dramatic representations, the parliamentary playbill might have run as follows: – 'Theatre Royal, St. Stephen's. Her Majesty's servants will perform on Monday next, under the distinguished patronage of Sir R. Peel, Lord Stanley, and Sir J. Graham, a grand melodrame, entitled 'Conservative Justice to Canada'. On Tuesday, by command, and for the benefit of Mr. O'Connell, the farce of 'Popish-Radical Justice to Ireland.'³²

Sinclair was obviously taken by the motif, since he is later reported uttering the comment, that 'he feared the curtain of prorogation would drop upon the performances in the St. Stephen's theatre before they had got through the whole of the performances which had been glaringly advertised to the country'.³³ And journalists in their political editorials referred to the Queen's speech, and parliamentary business as a playbill too, or to parliamentary personalities as actors. The *Saturday Review* in 1877, for example, 'The Queen's Speech is necessarily a little like the playbill of a country theatre in which a scratch company has been got together to support a star from London.'³⁴ Politicians' memoirs might also offer examples of politics viewed as theatre.³⁵

Parody was an important tool for early nineteenth-century radicals. Mock playbills figure in the publisher William Hone's defence in the court of King's Bench in December 1817 during a significant trial for profane and seditious libel, for publishing the *Political Litany*, when he referred to a parody 'on a play-bill, applied to sacred subjects, printed by Mr Cooke, a very respectable man, and one of "The Society of Friends"'.³⁶ The radical journal *Black Dwarf* had a biting theatrical notice of the 'King's Theatre, St Stephen's' in January 1820: *real cannon* to be turned on the gallery spectators, the leading tragedian 'Signor Sidemoto' (the harsh Home Secretary, Lord Sidmouth), etc.³⁷ *Figaro in London* had both 'Saint Stephen's Booth,' a travelling show illustrated with Robert Seymour's woodcut of Guelph and Co.'s 'troup of Charlatans' in 1833; and 'Opening of the Parliamentary Theatre Royal', in September 1837 with the queen as 'manageress of this establishment': the 'theatre will positively open with the School of reform, in which it is confidently expected that many political actors will appear,

³¹ *Hansard's Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd series, vol. xiii, col. 917-921, 20 June 1832, 'Attack on his Majesty at Ascot Heath', Duncombe stating it was *Tom Thumb* at the Coburg, the offending playbill being produced when the manager was absent from town (col. 919). Edward Bulwer Lytton, *A Letter to a late Cabinet Minister on the Present Crisis*, 7th edn (London, 1834), p. 6.

³² *Mirror of Parliament*, session of 1839, vol. iii, p. 1908; *The Past Condition, the Present Circumstances, and the Future Prospects of Her Majesty's Ministers. Speech of Sir George Sinclair, Bart., M.P. Delivered in the House of Commons, Friday, April 19, 1839, on Lord J. Russell's Motion Respecting the Government of Ireland* (London, 1839), p. 14.

³³ House of Commons, 22 May 1840, reported in *Hereford Times* (30 May 1840), p. [1].

³⁴ *Saturday Review* (10 February 1877), p. 154, see also *Lloyd's Weekly Newspaper* (10 February 1867), p. [1] on the Queen's speech as playbill; *London Daily News* (22 March 1849), and 'The House of Commons', *London Quarterly Review* (July 1854), pp. 1-20 (p. 6), on the programme of the week's work; *London Evening Standard* (25 June 1852), p. [2] on Sir James Graham as the 'most versatile of actors'. William Rathbone, *Parliamentary Debates*, 3rd series, vol. cccxxix, House of Commons, 26 July 1888, col. 571, refers to the local government bill as a 'vast political playbill drawn to pass and not to work'.

³⁵ See John Morley, *Recollections* (London, 1917), vol. i, ch. v, 'Dramatic Period', a sustained simile beginning, p. 217, 'The theatre was small in its proportions, but keen audiences watched it all over the English-speaking world'.

³⁶ *Evening Mail* (22 December 1817), p. [2].

³⁷ *Black Dwarf* (26 January 1820), pp. 81-3.

who have never yet been seen in a piece of this description'.³⁸ The Chartists in the 1840s also used the parliamentary playbill trope, with a lengthy mock playbill in the *Northern Star*, the movement's leading newspaper, in January 1841, ending with the unlikely text: '*The Proceeds of the First Night to be given to the Fund in aid of the Families of the Imprisoned Chartists!*'³⁹ Conservative newspapers also parodied politics, thus *John Bull*'s playbill for 'an entirely new farce, called LEGISLATION MADE EASY; OR, THE WAY TO KEEP IN' against Earl Grey's Whig administration in 1833.⁴⁰

In a great age of graphic satire, cartoons played with the motif of politician as mere entertainer too: in 1784 Thomas Rowlandson had commented on the election just beginning, and which would result in William Pitt the Younger being in power, with 'The Hanoverian Horse and the British Lion; a scene in a new play, lately acted at Westminster with distinguished applause. Act ii., scene last' (31 March 1784); and the famous early-nineteenth century satirist 'H.B.' (John Doyle) presented 'Soirées Mystérieuses, or wonderful performances at St Stephen's Theatre' in his 'Political Sketches' series in 1845, showing the Conservative prime minister Sir Robert Peel as conjuror.⁴¹

The humorous papers of the early nineteenth century had included the short-lived broadsheet *Political Drama* of C. J. Grant (1833–1835), *The Political Playbill* (July 1835) and *Political Stage* (September 1835);⁴² it is no surprise that *Punch*, the pre-eminent magazine for political satire in the Victorian period, was part of this politics-as-theatre tradition, given its whole conceit as pantomime and puppet show (*Punch* was also fascinated by 'genuine' theatre). There was a 'cut' showing 'The Second Appearance of Sir Robert Peel's Notorious Dancing Dogs' appearing under the title 'Theatre Royal, St Stephen's' in July 1844; John Tenniel produced 'Interrupting the Performance at The Theatre Royal, St. Stephen's', in April 1866; and Harry Furniss contributed 'Theatre Royal St. Stephen's. Old favourites, fresh additions to the company! New Scenery, Dresses and Appointments' in February 1886.⁴³ Verse also expressed the idea, as in 'Closed for Alterations and Repairs' in July 1892: 'The managerial soul | Though relieved, upon the whole, | From the six years' run, and all its stir | and strain; feels anxiety, no doubt, | As to "stars" which may go out'.⁴⁴ Actual parody playbills in *Punch* included the following for 1897:

³⁸ 'Saint Stephen's Booth', *Figaro in London* (9 November 1833), p. [177]; 'Opening of the Parliamentary Theatre Royal', *Figaro in London* (30 September 1837), p. 154.

³⁹ *Northern Star* (23 January 1841), p. [4].

⁴⁰ Reprinted, e.g., *Dublin Evening Mail* (8 May 1833), p. [4].

⁴¹ Rowlandson's cartoon is reproduced in Joseph Grego, *A History of Parliamentary Elections and Electioneering in the Old Days : showing the state of political parties and party warfare at the hustings and in the House of Commons from the Stuarts to Queen Victoria; illustrated from the original political squibs, lampoons, pictorial satires, and popular caricatures of the time* (London, 1886), p. 269.

⁴² See Celina Fox, *Graphic Journalism in England During the 1830s and 1840s* (London, 1988), p. 75; William Rayner, 'Comic Newspapers', *Notes and Queries* (15 June 1872), pp. 479–80 (480).

⁴³ 'Theatre Royal, St Stephen's', *Punch* (6 July 1844), p. 16; John Tenniel, 'Interrupting the Performance at The Theatre Royal, St. Stephen's', *Punch* (28 April 1866), p. 176; Harry Furniss, 'Theatre Royal St. Stephen's. Old favourites, fresh additions to the company! New Scenery, Dresses and Appointments', *Punch* (13 February 1886), p. 83. On Peel, see Richard Gaunt, 'Sir Robert Peel as Actor-Dramatist' in Yeandle, Newey and Richards, *Politics, Performance and Popular Culture*, ch.10.

⁴⁴ 'Closed for Alterations and Repairs', *Punch* (9 July 1892), p. 6.

PUBLIC THEATRICALS

HERE is a proposal for a Diamond Jubilee revival of *The School for Scandal* at the Theatre Royal, St Stephen's, Westminster, with the following (fore) cast: –

Sir Peter Teazle Lord S-L-SBURY.
Sir Oliver Surface. . . . Duke of D-V-NSH-RE.
Sir Benjamin Backbite. . . . Mr. J-HN B-RNS.
Sir Harry Bumper (with song) Sir W-LFR-D L-WS-N.
Sir Toby Mr. G-SCH-N.
Joseph Surface. . . . Mr. L-B-CH-RE.
Charles Surface Sir W-LL-M H-RC-RT.
Crabtree Mr. DR-GE.
Careless Mr. H-NRY CH-PL-N.
Rowley Mr. ARTH-R B-LF-R.
Moses Sir S-M-L M-NT-GU.
Snake Lord K-MB-RL-Y.
Trip Mr. G-RGE C-RZ-N.
Lady Teazle Mr. CH-MB-RL-N.
Lady Sneerwell Mr. T.G. B-WL-S.
Mrs Candour Colonel S-ND-RS-N.
Maria Sir E. ASHM-D B-RTL-TT.

The entertainment will be produced under the immediate patronage of the South African Committee, and the whole of the proceeds devoted to the relief of the Eastern Question. Copies of the playbill obtainable from the CH-NC-LL-R OF THE EXCH-Q-R, who has kindly undertaken to direct the entire stage management. “Gags” will be seen and approved by the L-RD CH-NC-LL-R and the SP-K-R. Dr. T-NN-R and the Free List entirely suspended.⁴⁵

All the actors are easy to identify (Dr Tanner was a Parnellite who was frequently suspended by the Speaker for his disruptive behaviour in the House, hence the final allusion): what is subversive apart from the identification of character traits or flaws such as superficiality and backbiting, is the feminine roles accorded, for instance for the upright evangelical and Irish unionist Colonel Edward Sanderson the role of the hypocritical tale-bearer Mrs Candour.

We can trace the appearance of the palace of Westminster as theatre through mock reviews and playbills elsewhere in the London satirical and humorous press, and in provincial versions. ‘The National Drama, St Stephen's Theatre, Westminster’ appeared in *The Satirist*; in June 1849: ‘an extraordinary representation for the benefit of the Irish members attached to this theatre’, was offered as a theatre review.⁴⁶ Other presentations – brief lines or more substantial skits – of St Stephen's theatre appeared in *Judy* in April 1869 on the Liberal Robert Lowe's first appearance as Chancellor of the Exchequer – not a ‘lowe comedy’, but burlesque or farce;⁴⁷ in *Fun* (in January 1863);⁴⁸ and *Funny Folks*'s mock playbill of a ‘GRAND BENEFIT PERFORMANCE IN AID OF THE CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER’ (the Conservative Sir Stafford Northcote), who, finding himself unable to maintain his authority as Leader of the House of Commons, is ‘in sore need of assistance’ in 1880.⁴⁹

And no doubt the idea of opposition politics as mere playbill extravaganza and farce crept into

⁴⁵ *Punch* (22 May 1897), p. 246; see also ‘The Playbill of The Future’, *Punch* (16 June 1883), p. 288.

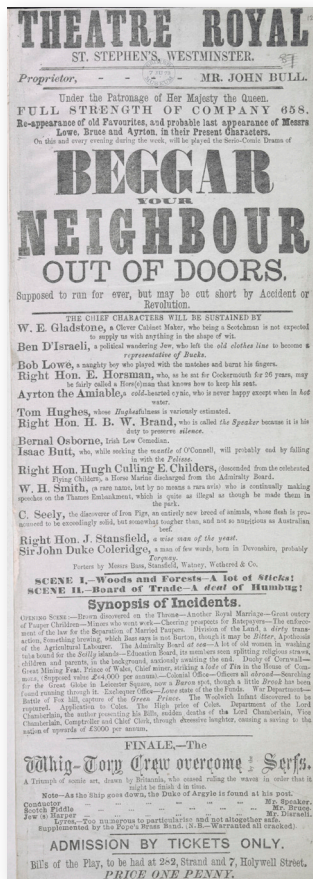
⁴⁶ ‘The National Drama, St Stephen's Theatre, Westminster’, *The Satirist; or, the True Censor of the Times* (23 June 1849), p. 294.

⁴⁷ *Judy; or The London serio-comic journal* (28 April 1869), p. 7.

⁴⁸ *Fun* (24 January 1863), p. 184.

⁴⁹ ‘Grand Benefit Performance in Aid of The Chancellor of The Exchequer’, *Funny Folks*, reprinted in *City Jackdaw* of Manchester (12 March 1880), p. 138.

party-political discourse, particularly as the idea of a party ‘programme’ of policies developed in the late Victorian era (see, for instance, in 1889, ‘he had taken a little trouble to examine the political playbills, the Barnum posters’, a comment, reported at a public meeting of Dundonian Conservatives, from the Conservative Edward Jenkins, a former MP).⁵⁰ One example of the playbill attacking all parties, in the British Library collection, is the playbill printed in London, entitled ‘Beggar your Neighbour out of Doors’ (fig. 4).



Theatre Royal, St. Stephen's, Westminster ... Re-appearance of old favourites, and probable last appearance of Messrs Lowe, Bruce and Ayrton, in their present characters. On this and every evening during the week, will be played the serio-comic drama of Beggar your neighbour out of doors. Supposed to run for ever, but may be cut short by accident or revolution ... [London] : 282 Strand; 7, Holywell Street) [1873?] General Reference Collection HS.74/2188(12) © British Library.

One would expect the genre of the mock, parody or burlesque playbill and theatre review to be employed in many other political and social reform causes, and as comment on political scandals. These include early nineteenth-century opposition to the Union of Ireland with Great Britain, through mock playbills printed separately and in the Irish newspapers.⁵¹ The trade

⁵⁰ *Dundee Advertiser* (29 November 1889), p.7.

⁵¹ The mock playbill appeared in Irish electoral contests, see Raymond Gillespie and Andrew Hadfield, (eds.), *The Oxford History of the Irish Book. iii: The Irish Book in English, 1550–1800* (Oxford, 2006), p.40, referring to the County Cork election 1790, material in Trinity College Dublin collection. Martyn J. Powell, *The Politics of Consumption in Eighteenth-Century Ireland* (Basingstoke, 2005), p.113. The *English Short Title Catalogue* (hereafter ESTC), which did not actually include theatrical playbills, lists *At the royal circus, near College-Green. For the benefit of Mrs. Ireland. On Wednesday, January 15, will be performed a grand pantomimical, serio-comic olio* [Dublin, 1800]. It is available on ECCO. See also *The great Mrs. Britain's second benefit, amphitheatre, near the College Square, on Wednesday, February 12, will be performed an entirely new politico-dramatic olio, called Self Immolation, or, The Wise-Men of Gotham* (Dublin, 1800), ESTC T64172, and also available on ECCO; *This present evening, Tuesday the 22d January, will be represented at the Royal Circus, Foster-Place, a dramatic olio, called, The union, or, Ierne divided. The principal characters by a variety of old and new performers, collected for the occasion, as will be hereafter notified and detailed* (Dublin, 1799?) ESTC T175205, available via ECCO.

union outrages in Sheffield in the 1860s generated a playbill ‘representing the plot against the saw-grinder and the blowing up of his house ... with execrable coarseness and levity’.⁵² The Oxford Movement in the Church of England stimulated the ‘anti-Puseyites’ to create a mock playbill, in the form of a placard in the parish of St George’s in the East in 1859. The satire was due to the conflict between the High Church rector, the Reverend Bryan King and the Low Churchman appointed as lecturer, the Reverend Allen, which had led to riots. Under the heading, ‘Ecclesiastical Play-house, St. George’s-in-the-East,’ was the ‘celebrated’ play, *The High Road to Rome; or, Fools and their Followers*.

The principal character supported by *Giant Ring*, who, after 17 years’ rehearsal, is quite perfect in the character of *Obstinate!* He will be assisted by numerous artists, who will be seen advantage, as they appear in their shirts outside instead of next their skin. Several ladies will also make their appearance as Parson, or Boy Catchers (if they can), and take part in the drawling, *alias* singing. The whole to conclude with the notes of the powerful organ ! which will, if possible, try to overpower the voices, catcalls, &c. Good order will be attempted to be kept by a powerful army of police, paid for their attendance out of the Poor-rates. GOD SAVE THE QUEEN— *Rome!*⁵³

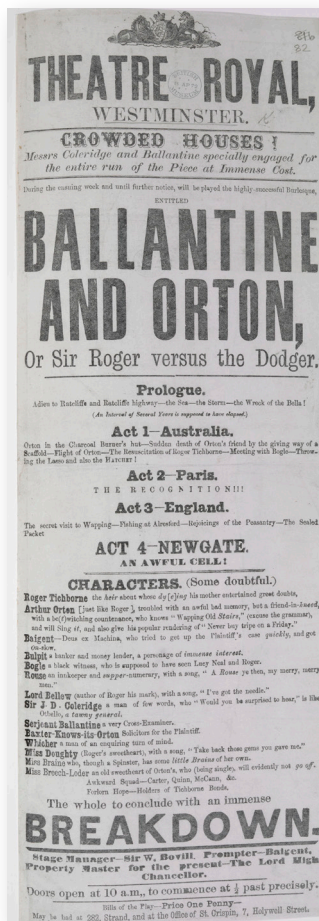
The Tichborne Claimant cause which became a bizarre radical movement against the aristocracy in 1870s, generated several playbills, including (fig. 5) a squib ‘circulated in London, for performance at the Theatre Royal, Westminster’: *Ballantine and Orton; or, Sir Roger versus the Dodger*: ‘Crowded Houses! | Messrs Coleridge and Ballantine specially engaged for the entire run of the the [sic] Piece at Immense Cost’), with the three acts summarizing the famous life story of the imposter to the Tichborne estates in Hampshire, from Arthur Orton’s youth as a butcher’s son from insalubrious Ratcliffe in London, to his return to England from Wagga Wagga, Australia (a digitized copy from the National Library of Australia may be viewed via the online Trove archive).⁵⁴ The character list ‘(Some doubtful.)’ relied on the readers’ good knowledge of the case, the physical appearance of Orton and the witnesses, and awareness of the judge, William Bovill, and the opposing legal figures of Serjeant William Ballantine and Sir John Coleridge. Though it was a ‘very poor printed squib ... met with some currency, but scarcely raised a laugh’ according to the *Shields Daily Gazette* the design and use of typography was a clever parody of the playbill form (the printer is not divulged).⁵⁵

⁵² The work is described in detail in *Sheffield Daily Telegraph* (14 February 1867), p. 4, and commented upon, p. 2.

⁵³ ‘St George’s in the East – Abatement of the Disturbances’, *Morning Advertiser* (5 December 1859), p. 3. The Reverend F. Paget, the Puseyite chaplain to the Bishop of Oxford, used a parody playbill against the Chevalier Bunsen in 1843, see letter of ‘Antiquus’, *Devizes and Wiltshire Gazette* (19 January 1843), p. [3].

⁵⁴ ‘Ballantine and Orton, or, Sir Roger versus the Dodger’, <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/6540713> [accessed 13/12/2017]. On the theatrical, music-hall and larger ephemeral treatment of the case, including ballads by Henry Disley, see Rohan McWilliam, *The Tichborne Claimant. A Victorian Sensation* (London, 2007), Part Two; McWilliam notes the playbill spoofs at p. 206, from British Library, 1881.c.3 (now HS.74/2188).

⁵⁵ Reproduced in *Frome Times* (27 March 1872), p. 4; assessed in *Shields Daily Gazette* (7 March 1872), p. [3]. The address was shared c.1874 with *Lloyd’s Weekly London Newspaper* and *The True Briton*.



'Theatre Royal, Westminster ... The ... burlesque entitled BALLANTINE AND ORTON; or, Sir Roger versus the Dodger' (London: 7 Holywell Street, 1872). General Reference Collection 1881.c.3.(82.) now HS.74/2188(82). © British Library.

In my own research on capital punishment abolition I encountered the parody exhibition advertisement, a variation of the playbill, promoting a 'grand moral spectacle ... a young girl seventeen years of age is to be publicly strangled', produced by the Quaker abolitionist and publisher Charles Gilpin in April 1847.⁵⁶

As the *Shields Daily Gazette*'s report of the squib indicates, metropolitan mockery was picked up, through 'London correspondents' and the London press, in the provincial press. There were also elaborate provincial versions, such as this, from the fashionable weekly *Cheltenham Looker-on* in 1839:

⁵⁶ J. Gregory, *Victorians against the Gallows. Capital Punishment and the Abolitionist Movement in Nineteenth-Century Britain* (London, 2012), p. 136.

THEATRE ROYAL, ST. STEPHEN'S, WESTMINSTER.
The Manager has the honour to announce that THE HOUSE will commence its Performances
for the Session on
TUESDAY NEXT, FEB. 5th,
when an OPENING ADDRESS will be delivered, entitled
THE COMIC ANNUAL;
Written expressly for the occasion, by the Cabinet Ministers. After which will be presented,
by "Her Majesty's Servants," the favourite Comedy of
Much Ado about Nothing;
Which was acted for more than **ONE HUNDRED NIGHTS** during the Last Season with the
most unbounded applause. In the course of the Evening several extraordinary SCENES will be
got up, for the especial amusement of THE GALLERY.

The whole to conclude with the laughable Farce of
POPPING "*THE QUESTION*:"

The Principal Characters by the Right Honourable THE SPEAKER and TWO BRACE OF
TELLERS; at the termination of which the whole strength of THE HOUSE will be exhibited.

Applications for Seats to be made to Mr. O'Connell—Dress Circle, £2000 ("say £2000!")

NO MONEY RETURNED.

Manager, Lord Melbourne.
Leader of the Band, LORD JOHN RUSSELL— *Cheque-taker*, Mr. SPRING RICE.
Prompter, MR. O'CONNELL.

[*No admittance behind the scenes.*]

*** It is confidently expected that Her Majesty will honour the Performances with her presence. Having been lately much amused at witnessing Mr. Van Amburg's wonderful power over his Wild Beasts, she is extremely anxious to see how Mr. O'Connell manages to catch his, (*vulgo* —"the Tail,") an exhibition which will probably take place in the course of the evening's entertainments.⁵⁷

Word play and *double entendres*, allusion to contemporary celebrities such as the American lion tamer Isaac Van Amburg, and the nickname for the supporters of the Irish nationalist Daniel O'Connell (the tail), indicate a sophisticated parody for a smart readership among the Conservatives of Cheltenham.

The parody playbill in politics beyond Westminster

Just as the actual theatrical playbill, which the British Library's *In the Spotlight* project seeks to make available to the public, was widely produced across the British Isles, it is probable that examples of the mock playbill are to be found employed in political (and social) satire beyond

⁵⁷ *Cheltenham Looker-On* (2 February 1839), p. [3].

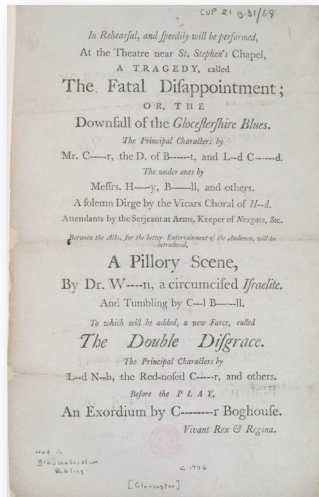
London in all sorts of local debates and controversies.⁵⁸ A number of these are in the British Library collections, either as separate sheets, bound in collections of political ephemera or printed by contemporaries in their histories of local electoral contest.⁵⁹ Many more could be identified by targeting the coverage of elections in local newspapers that have been digitized in the *British Newspaper Archive*, or which have been preserved in local, regional and national archives, listed through the National Archives, and accessed via the collections management system CALM, and referenced and reproduced in published local histories. Some fourteen separate archives have been identified with political playbills. A few may be viewed in online

⁵⁸ A number of these political playbills are listed in ESTC, e.g., *Acted but once this seven years: At the great theatrical booth in the Old Pig Market, in Pontefract, some time next spring will be revived, the comedy of All in the wrong, or, The sham election* [Pontefract?: s.n., 1767?] ESTC N505385, which concerns John Walsh's purchasing of burgesses in Pontefract in 1766; and *On the 21st day of June, 1790, will be exhibited in the Guild-hall, Worcester; an old play revived and new modelled, which has never been performed but once, since the days of Tracy, called, The corporation's defeat, or, liberty triumphant* ESTC T227070, concerning the Worcester corporation, and in the British Library collection.

⁵⁹ See, digitized and available through Google Books, the following examples: *Coke and Birch. The paper war carried on at the Nottingham Election, 1803, containing the whole of the addresses, songs, squibs, &c. circulated by the contending parties; including the books of accidents and chances* (Nottingham, 1803) which reproduces the playbill, 'New Theatre Nottingham. Now Rehearsing, and speedily will be performed, by a Company of Jacobite Comedians', pp. 170-2, 'For the benefit of the Loyal True Blues, and the better security of our good King and Country', pp. 173-4; *A compendious and impartial account of the Election, at Liverpool which commended on the first and closed on the eighth of November, 1806, together with such of the songs and squibs as possess either point or humour, and are not of a libellous tendency: and also a correct list of the freemen who polled, etc.* (Liverpool, 1806), which reproduces playbills from 'Corporation Theatre', pp. 101-2 and 'Theatre Royal, Castle Street', pp. 108-9; *An Impartial Collection of addresses, songs, squibs, etc. published during the election of members of Parliament for the borough of Liverpool, October 1812, etc.* ('Isleman', 1812), 'Theatre Royal, Castle Street', p. 71, 'New Theatre, under the Patronage of Buonaparte', pp. 77-8, 'Revolutionary Theatre', pp. 120-1; *A collection of electioneering squibs, songs, &c. &c. published during the contested elections at Pontefract, in the year 1812* (Pontefract, 1812), pp. 57-8, for 'Theatre, Pontefract. For the benefit of Mr. Clearall'; *The Norwich Election Budget relative to the contest between Messrs. Gurney & Grant, and Messrs. Peel & Ogle, July 29th, 1830. Also a selection of the songs, squibs, &c* (Norwich, 1830), pp. 44-7, for a reproduction of the playbill 'Blue and White Theatre, Large Dutch Yard, Norwich', p. 60; quasi-playbills on entertainments, 'To the Electors of Norwich. Mr Tool begs to announce to the Independent Electors of Norwich ...', and 'Mr Goulding, Blacksmith, Saint Helen's', pp. 152-3.

exhibitions relating to political ephemera.⁶⁰

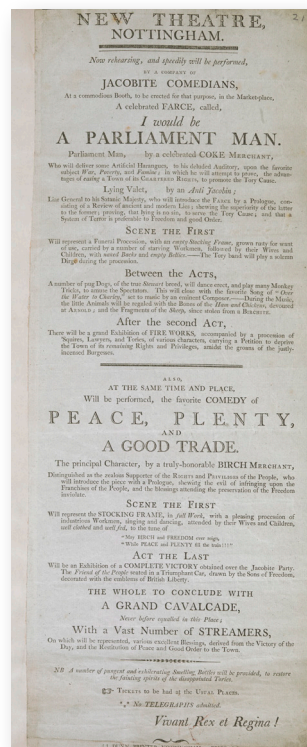
Some examples of the wider (and local) use of the mock playbill must suffice here, beginning with an eighteenth-century example, before turning to some early nineteenth-century examples. From Gloucester in May 1776, during a costly election contest, there comes this playbill (fig. 6), in which the men lampooned are William Bromley Chester, a candidate standing for representation as a knight of the shire, his patron the Duke of Beaufort, and the previous Member of Parliament, Edward Southwell, now Lord de Clifford, who had been supported by Beaufort:



In rehearsal, and speedily will be performed, at the Theatre near St. Stephen's Chapel, a tragedy, called The fatal disappointment; or, the downfall of the Gloucestershire Blues. The principal characters by Mr. C-----r, the D. of B-----t, and L--d C-----d. ... [Gloucester, 1776] Great Britain England Gloucester. General Reference Collection Cup.21.g.31/68 © British Library.

⁶⁰ For published work on mock playbills in local politics, see for example, Hannah Barker, *Language, Print, and Electoral Politics, 1790–1832: Newcastle-under-Lyme BroadSides* (Woodbridge, 2001), broadsides 1830.30 and 1830.31; Roy Lewis and John Lewis, *Politics and Printing in Winchester, 1830–1880* (Richmond, 1980), pp. 42–7, from the Stopher Collection in the Winchester City Museums collection. For local histories, see *The Cheshire Sheaf* (Chester, originally articles in *Chester Courant*), (February 1879), p. 173 on Sir Watkin Wynn and Chester election, a playbill of 1812; D. M. Short, *A Bibliography of the Printed Items Relating to the City of Lincoln*, Lincoln Record Society, 79 (Lincoln, 1990), pp. 206, 237. See, through the National Archive's *Discovery* portal and online catalogues (arranged here by county, alphabetically): Bedfordshire Archives and Records Service, 'A New Play called Anticipation', printed by Merry, 1 March 1820, BOR B/G10/2/53; Berkshire Record Office, N/D89/4, 'Theatre Dis-Loyal', D/EP4/O2/2/13, c.1854 parliamentary election, D/EP4/O2/1/45, D/EP4/O2/2/32, c.1880, anti-Tory spoof, municipal election c.1896; East Riding of Yorkshire, Beverley Borough, DDBC/27, material assembled by Gillyatt Sumner, Playbill, Beverley Theatre 'Water Witch' and the 'Wags of Windsor' 1836; Essex Record Office, Round Family, D/DRb Z8, two variants of mock playbill for theatre at Chelmsford, for election contest 1830; Norfolk Record Office, MC 3243/76/4, playbill printed by C. Berry, 1830 'Blue And White Theatre'; Somerset Heritage Centre, DD/L/1/60/14/20, playbill attack on candidates in Minehead election, 1802; Staffordshire County Record Office, Records of the Dyott family of Freeford, reference D661/17/5 (1812), a mock playbill; for other collections, see Bolton Archives and Local Studies Service, 'A Grand Novel and Startling Entertainment on the Bolton Borough Stage' on John Thomasson and John Kynaston Cross, 1880, ZZ/130/5/17; City of Westminster Archives, Gardner Box 62 No. 51, 'For the benefit of Carlo Khan's Committee', on the Westminster Elections, 1784. The Special Collection of the University of Glasgow has a mock playbill from 1837, in the collection assembled by John Smith of Cruthersland, Eph p/232, 'Great Attraction! Theatre of Intolerants, Glasgow' printed by Aitkin and full of local allusion, ending with the 'Laughable Farce, entitled The Devil to pay; or, The Day after the Election!': see 'The Ephemera of John Smith' by Adam McNaughton (September 2004) <http://special.lib.gla.ac.uk/exhibns/ephemera/political.html> [accessed 13/12/2017]. See also the satirical broadside, c. 1823, from the Dublin Castle Archival Collection, DCA00108 (1) on the so-called 'Bootle Riot' of 1822, which includes 'Killing No Murder' and 'The Grand Jury, or Exit in a Rage', and published at <http://www.oireachtas.ie/parliament/about/libraryresearchservice/onlinecataloguecollections/irelandandthecrown/satiresandplaybills/> [accessed 13/12/2017].

From Nottingham in 1803, comes the following playbill squib, presenting the contest between Daniel Parker Coke and Joseph Birch as one between Jacobite Tories (anti-Jacobins), and the liberty-loving followers of Birch, and with plenty of rich local allusion (fig. 7) – Coke and Birch would be involved in two contests as Birch (elected in July 1802) was unseated on petition in March 1803 and a new election was held in May. Both this and the example from Gloucester reproduce the style of the eighteenth-century playbill with its uniform typeface (the Nottingham playbill uses two fonts) by varied effects produced through italics, capitals and bold type faces. Later nineteenth-century squibs masquerading as playbills would emulate the elaboration of the genuine theatre playbill.



New Theatre, Nottingham. Now rehearsing, and speedily will be performed, by a company of Jacobite comedians, at a commodious booth, to be erected for that purpose, in the Market-place, a celebrated farce, called, I would be a Parliament man ... Also, at the same time and place, will be performed, the favorite comedy of Peace, plenty, and a good trade ... The whole to conclude with a grand cavalcade, never before equalled in this place ... ([Nottingham] J. Dunn, 1803). General Reference Collection 1888.c.18/1(21) © British Library.

A mock playbill on *Midsummer's Night's Dream*, re-cast by an eminent hand, lampooned Whig reformers such as James Gibson, in Scotland in the early nineteenth century, complete with quotes from Shakespeare.⁶¹ Sir James Graham was the target of a Tory playbill in Hull in 1818, allegedly in a performance of the *Road to Ruin*, a 'Grand miscellaneous piece, written by Dr Watson, and received with tumultuous applause last year at the Spa Fields', with Graham lampooned in his reforming Whig political phase, as the character General Ludd (named after the mythical leader of the machine-breakers, Ned Ludd): an embarrassing fact when reported in 1844 when he was the Home Secretary in Peel's Conservative government.⁶² Denis O'Brien's study of the Scottish economist and editor of *The Scotsman*, John R. McCulloch, notes a playbill mocking him and other figures involved in Tory and Whig political controversy, c.1821, in Edinburgh Public Library.⁶³

In Newcastle upon Tyne in 1833 the Whig politician Lord Durham's supporters committed 'outrageous assault,' on the editor, in response to a playbill squib on actors at the dinner in honour of Lord Durham in Sunderland, a 'mere joke', printed at the office of the *Newcastle Journal*.⁶⁴

⁶¹ *Edinburgh News*, reprinted *Kelso Chronicle* (15 March 1850), p. 2.

⁶² This was widely noted, e.g., *The Scotsman* (17 April 1844), p. 4.

⁶³ D. O'Brien, 'McCulloch and the Press' in D. P. O'Brien, *J. R. McCulloch: A Study in Classical Economics* (London, 1970), p. 28.

⁶⁴ *Newcastle Journal* (30 November 1833), p. [4].

In the same year, a handbill in playbill form, without a printer's name, sought to intervene in the effort to censure an MP for his conduct in parliament, in Holbeach in Lincolnshire, the meeting parodied as *The South Lincolnshire Flats, or the Patriots of 1733*.⁶⁵

An antiquarian in 1852, looking at old elections in Bristol, could reflect that there was nothing new under the sun when it came to the use of mock playbills, 'with the candidates and their supporters, set forth as intending to perform in the "Disappointed Candidate," &c'.⁶⁶ Interestingly, before the impending and historic general election of 1945, the Bristol Reference Library would select its bound collection of electioneering material from our era of study as its 'book of the week,' note 'playbills as broadsides', and quote from the 1780 election playbill, 'For the Benefit of a Declining Party'.⁶⁷

John Ersser of the Theatre Royal in Blackburn, Lancashire, produced an anonymous skit on the Gladstonian Liberal party as theatrical company, 'Preliminary Prospectus' in the *Manchester Courier*, during the general election of April 1880, which was then copied in other regional newspapers and re-appeared as a penny pamphlet printed by Charles Tiplady and Son of Blackburn. Another squib produced by Ersser in the form of playbill appeared after the election, in July.⁶⁸ Whether general election, as here, or the local elections for such offices as Poor Law commissioner, and vestry politics, the playbill squib was a commonplace genre.⁶⁹

The parody playbill beyond Britain

The mock, sham, burlesque or parody playbill was a form of political satire flourishing beyond Britain, as examples of its use in the United States, in British India, Australia, in France, Prussia, Russia, and elsewhere, demonstrate.⁷⁰ In Elijah Hicky's *Bengal Gazette*, the earliest English-language newspaper in Calcutta, we are told by one late Victorian historian of Calcutta, the 'favourite method ... for pillorying those whom it desired to show up to public ridicule was to announce a play or masquerade or concert ... and to assign certain suggestive parts or characters to members of society disguised under the thinnest veil'.⁷¹ In the United States there was a playbill broadside satirizing leading New York politicians and their supporters, such as the newspaper editor James Cheetham, DeWitt Clinton and the merchant Pierre Van Wyck, published in 1804 entitled 'BLOODY MURDER!!! Political Theatre. On Tuesday Evening, the 24th of April, 1804, will be presented A COMIC TRAGEDY, never performed in this STATE,

⁶⁵ *Stamford Mercury* (24 May 1833), p. [3].

⁶⁶ 'Old Bristol Elections. No. III', *Bristol Times and Mirror* (10 April 1852), p. 6. See John Latimer, *The Annals of Bristol in the Eighteenth Century* (Bristol, 1893), p. 445, for the placard playbill, here described as 'for the benefit of a weak Administration', in 'All in the Wrong: or The Tories Distracted'. See also Madge Dresser, *Slavery Obscured: The Social History of the Slave Trade in an English Provincial Port* (2001; London, 2016), p. 154, a playbill against the Tory candidate.

⁶⁷ *Western Daily Press* (2 July 1945), p. 3.

⁶⁸ *Manchester Courier* (10 July 1880), p. 9.

⁶⁹ See *The Navigator; or How to get into the Commission*, reported by one local historian, *Hartlepool Northern Daily Mail* (12 May 1898), p. 3; on vestry politics lampooned, *St George's Theatre of Varieties*, about St George's East Vestry, noted in *East London Observer* (14 June 1879), p. 3.

⁷⁰ See Victoria Frede, *Doubt, Atheism, and the Nineteenth-Century Russian Intelligentsia* (Madison, WI, 2011), p.161; on British India see the reference in Henry Busteed, *Echoes from Old Calcutta: Being Chieftly Reminiscences of the Days of Warren Hastings, Francis and Impey*, 2nd, enlarged edn (Calcutta, 1888), p.181. On France, see *Three years with the Duke or Wellington in private life: By an Ex-aid-de-camp* (London, 1853), p. 131, for 'Theatre De L'ambition, | Place Du Carrousel, Ou de L'Elysee Bourbon. | Aujourd'hui, Au Bénéfice D'une Famille Indigente De Corse' in 1815. For Prussia, see *Evening Mail* (8 December 1848), p. 5: auction advertisements and playbills being used to circumvent censorship.

⁷¹ Henry Busteed, *Echoes from Old Calcutta*, p. 189; the playbills are reproduced pp. 190-1, with the character Sir Francis Wronghead appearing, for Warren Hastings, in the tragedy *Tyranny in Full Bloom, or the Devil to Pay*.

called the FAMILY FACTION IN THE Suds, or, VIRTUE TRIUMPHANT'.⁷² Examples of political satire from the theatre in Norfolk, Virginia, listed in Lucy Pilkinton's massive theatre history research, included theatre reviews and playbills.⁷³

The parodic playbill exploited a recognisable language (hyperbolic, ludicrous, clichéd) and appreciated the typographic and stylistic effects of the genuine playbill. Sometimes, not surprisingly, these parodies related to theatre itself: see, for instance the anti-African American parody by Mordecai Noah, targeting the African Theater, in his *National Advocate* in 1823⁷⁴; and a mock playbill criticizing the Queen's Theatre Royal in Melbourne in 1846.⁷⁵

Conclusion

Theatre was an important part of both elite and popular culture in the Georgian and Victorian eras; theatrical metaphor was a feature of British political discourse, and a way of viewing and satirizing politicians. Commercial enterprises even parodied the playbill form to sell their non-theatrical commodities.⁷⁶ This did not exhaust the humorous and satirical potential of the playbill, of course. Beyond the contentions of national and local politics, there were the defamatory libels that took the form of mock playbills: one example reported in the press concerned an auctioneer from the town of Romford outside London in 1884, defaming a fellow auctioneer and solicitor, posted outside the defendant's home and announcing that there would appear at the Theatre Royal, Romford, *The Swindling Partners or Lessoner's Trust Money*.⁷⁷

And, as indicated by the playbill preserving controversy in the Church of England, power struggles in religious bodies also resorted to parody playbills. Protestant Nonconformity used playbill satire in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries against the unconverted and in internal polemics: in Chester in May 1816 a playbill 'posted on the walls, &c during the Races by some crazy sectarists', introduced God and Christ 'as supposed performers'.⁷⁸ Methodists had produced a parody playbill, 'By Command of the KING of KINGS, | And at the Desire of ALL who Love his APPEARING. | At the THEATRE of the UNIVERSE,' with inevitable infernal meaning given to 'The Pit', which was reproduced and attacked by *The Satirist or Monthly Meteor* in August 1809.⁷⁹ A variant of this would reappear as a religious broadside.⁸⁰ The opponents of reform among the Wesleyan Methodists of the South West of England produced handbills in playbill form to ridicule the reform efforts of Dr Samuel Warren and Robert Eckett in 1836, with playbills on 'Disappointed Ambition', with Eckett as 'Bold Bully' and Thomas Rosevear

⁷² *American Book Prices Current*, xxi (New York, 1916), p. 702.

⁷³ See material listed in Lucy B. Pilkinton, 'Theatre in Norfolk, Virginia, 1788–1812' (Ph.D., University of Michigan, 1993), part 2.

⁷⁴ Robert Hornback, 'Black Shakespeareans vs. Minstrel Burlesques: "proper" English, racist blackface dialect, and the contest for representing "blackness"', *Shakespeare Studies*, xxxviii (2010), pp.125–60 (p.134). See also, for parodic playbills in the American *Life*, Jerold Savery and Patricia Marks, *The Smiling Muse: Victoriana in the Comic Press* (London, 1985), p. 191.

⁷⁵ Richard Fotheringham and Angela Turner (eds.), *Australian Plays for the Colonial Stage: 1834–1899* (Brisbane, 2006), p.107. See Gillian Russell, *The Playbill and Its People: Australia's Earliest Printed Document* (Canberra, 2011), on the playbill as a source for understanding the early colony in 1796.

⁷⁶ See John Strachan, *Advertising and Satirical Culture in the Romantic period* (Cambridge, 2007), p. 236, a playbill for the barber J. R. D. Huggins, in the *Commercial Advertiser* of 1808.

⁷⁷ *Essex Standard* (2 August 1884), p.2.

⁷⁸ 'J. J. H.', *The Stranger in Chester: Giving an Accurate Sketch of Its Local History* (Chester, 1816), p. 233.

⁷⁹ *The Satirist, or Monthly Meteor* (1 August 1809), pp. 153–9, the playbill (printed by J. Mann, 36, Commercial Road, London) printed at pp.157–9. In fact this was a reprinting of text by Rowland Hill printed in London by Hales, c.1774, see ECCO: it was also republished in America, see ESTC W38627; see also EEBO for a nineteenth-century copy by E. Palmer and Son of Paternoster Row, London.

⁸⁰ See Louis James, *Print and the People 1819–1851* (London, 1976), p. 153, reproducing an undated sheet by J. Quigley of Cable Street, Whitechapel.

as ‘Devil on two Sticks, or old Father Purity’.⁸¹ Playbills would be resorted to elsewhere in later Wesleyan Methodist controversy.⁸² George Eliot’s ‘Janet’s Repentance’, a story in *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857), features the parody playbill used to cruel effect against the evangelical Reverend Tryan, through the ‘Screaming Farce of THE PULPIT SNATCHER’.⁸³

To return to parliamentary politics, it may be that as this became more formalized in national parties and channelled through the national press, and as the views of the electorate became expressed through secret ballots, the independent political lampooning which included the parody playbill became less frequent (this was the view of the *Western Daily Press* writer whose comments preface this essay).⁸⁴ There are late nineteenth-century examples, as we have seen, and political radicals continued to use the mode of satire, the anarchist journal *Freedom*, for example, poking fun at the Theatre-Royal in Westminster, with Grisly Social Tragedy, Irish Pantomime, the farce of the Queen’s Speech and with a solo from Keir Hardie, ‘posing as the Champion of the Unemployed,’ in 1893.⁸⁵ The tendency to see politics in theatrical terms may have continued, but in an image and moving-image saturated culture our modern-day equivalent in terms of allusion to politicians-as-entertainers, fictional characters and dramatic plots, would probably be the parody film poster.⁸⁶

In this short essay it has only been possible to indicate the general history and nature of the political playbill in Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: like the project of cataloguing and describing the ‘authentic’ playbills of theatre and entertainment, the political playbill needs further mapping in terms of its survival as actual copies, its contemporary reproduction as part of the circulation and preservation of those election squibs in newspapers and election histories, and the role that the playbill had in satirizing political and other controversies beyond Westminster elections.

⁸¹ Matthew Baxter, *Methodism: Memorials of the United Methodist Free Churches, with Recollections of the Rev. Robert Eckett and Some of His Contemporaries* (London, 1865), p. 419. In the early days of Methodism the stage – and hence playbills – had been used to attack the movement, see J. U. Walker, *A History of Wesleyan Methodism in Halifax and Its Vicinity from its Commencement to the Present Day* (Halifax, 1836), pp. 201-2. See the printed sermon by Alexander Kilham, ‘Playbill, for the 17th of Dec. 1793. In the City of Aberdeen’, in *The Methodist Monitor* (Leeds, 1796), pp. 5-32.

⁸² See details of ‘Grand Exhibition! Extraordinary Illusions!!’ parodying a playbill, in Bradford, during secession crisis between Conference and reformers, involving the personalities of Reverend James Everett, Reverend Samuel Dunn and Reverend William Griffiths, *The Players* (9 June 1860), p. 190.

⁸³ G. Eliot, *Scenes of Clerical Life* 2 vols (London, 1858), vol. ii, pp.182-184.

⁸⁴ See Vernon, *Politics and the People*, ch. 3, for analysis of a restrictive politics of print replacing a public and collective political culture using oral and visual modes, in this period.

⁸⁵ *Freedom* (March 1893), p. 12.

⁸⁶ See, for example, the cartoon by Peter Brookes, *The Times* (10 January 2018), p. 29, parodying Theresa May as Winston Churchill, and alluding to the new film starring Gary Oldman, *Darkest Hour*, this version ‘Dafta nominated’.